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ABSTRACT

The gulf between scholarly applications and rhetorical praxis in the speech classroom is enormous. It seems clear that the theoretical base will never release its stranglehold on the classical paradigm until the agendas of basic course classrooms do so as well. No new paradigm may realistically hope to contest the established tradition until the paradigm can be and is taught and applied so handily as to satisfy the pragmatic needs of professional and student communicators. There needs to be a special relationship between practices in basic courses and the advancement of theoretical knowledge in the field. By deliberately broadening the basic course focus to include new theory, educators take an important step to ease the path as they reach for the future. (Nineteen references are attached.) (MG)

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On Theoretical Progress

and

Basic Course Pedagogy

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ON THEORETICAL PROGRESS AND BASIC COURSE PEDAGOGY

New Theory in the Basic Course

First Harold Innis (1972), followed by Marshall McLuhan (1964), then Walter Ong (1982) and Eric Havelock(1986), most recently scholars as close to home as Gronbeck (1987) and Dance (1987) bring to our attention the importance of media ecology, and of shifts in the ratios of media societies rely upon in their public communication. Also, in the field of rhetorical theory, we notice a burgeoning exploration of dramatistic or narrative explanations (Scott, 1984; Fisher, 1984, 1985; Bormann, 1985) as alternatives to the classical paradigm.

Interestingly enough, we may note in the controversy surrounding both these theoretical thrusts reaffirmation of McLuhan and Fiore's (1967) pp. 81, 94) observation that "institutions always strive to make the new media do the work of the old" (pp. 81, 94). We see, for instance, that video screens only became acceptable in the classroom once they were functionally attached to typewriter-like keyboards. Likewise, resistance to narrative-based explanations comes loudly from quarters (e.g. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969; McGee and Nelson, 1985; Warnick, 1973; Rowland, 1987) where classical rhetoric and what Fisher calls the "Rational World Paradigm" subsume or subordinate narrative within their domain, disregarding

the distinct possibility that, while classical rhetoric's origins lie in the written word, narrative functioned to induce cooperation long before, in times of exclusively oral verbalization (Ong, 1982, pp. 31-97; Havelock, 1986, pp. 369-372).

Our present thesis, however, traffics in specific theories only by way of examples. We cite the foregoing to illustrate the advancement and resistance to advancement of theory in our studies and to suggest a sense in which mediation is a possible impediment to the same. Our purpose is first to recognize an important role for our basic course in the advancement of new theory--that, as Cary Nelson (1986) puts it, "the scene of pedagogy is a necessary part of theoretical rigor"(p. 4)--and to consider at least some of the arguments that should swirl around this role. Indeed, we note that the endurance and spread of a new paradigm come not just from its ability to defend against detractors' assaults but also from whether or not a paradigm emerges in the daily routines of the academy, especially those of the classroom and laboratory.

Specifically in our own field, the gulf between scholarly applications and rhetorical praxis is enormous. Long after rhetorical critics, for instance, are using a new model, we may find that the model still receives only a mention or two in basic course lectures, and no practical use at all by beginning students. Indeed, it

seems clear that our own theoretical base will never release its stranglehold on the classical paradigm--with traditional writing-based rationalism at its heart--until the agendas of our basic speech classrooms do so as well. The speech classroom cannot present other theories as serious contenders to Aristotle as long as our textbooks continue to revolve so fundamentally around his work. Most crucially, our textbooks cannot but remain wrapped in the philosophy from which texts themselves derive and this is the essence of media determinancy at work: only as new media both demand and embody the efficacy of new paradigms will we be released from the dominance of the classical tradition because that tradition is at the very roots of the written media that dominate academic discourse. It is thus significant that the basic pattern of media dominance in effect for centuries is now indeed changing.

Speech-Communication, as we used to tell each other--tongue-in-cheek--in graduate school, is the study of how to do what other disciplines do. Despite our deep tradition of written scholarship, we resemble the fine arts in our inability to adequately assess the progress of our students with written measures alone. Like theirs, our practice was born of prior media. A closely related condition is that where the incorporation of new theory in most classrooms amounts to no more than adding a lecture, a section of text, perhaps a laboratory assignment, and a

few questions at exam time, new theory in the basic speech course demands genuine practical application. In other words, no new paradigm may realistically hope to contest the established tradition until that paradigm can be--indeed, is--taught and applied so handily as to satisfy the pragmatic needs of professional and student communicators.

What are the reasons we find classical theory so attractive in the basic course? Not only do our texts revolve around it, but also our time-honored teaching methods and with them our own practiced competence are steeped in the Rhetoric of Aristotle and the give and take of traditional argumentation. Also, multiple-section course directors, whose concerns include the success of novice teachers, have precious small incentive to encourage deviation from the tried and true. It is part of our thesis, however, that those of us associated with the basic course are in a unique position to steer the discipline toward new theory; further that it is no less appropriate or incumbent upon us to do so than it is for the psychologist to teach Skinner alongside Freud or the literary critic to teach Frye with Pope and Dryden.

In fact, it is more incumbent upon us. Speech classrooms are the only laboratories we have and they are practical laboratories where each student experiments with his or her own equipment. Students may replicate

scientific experiments and write volumes of sophomoric essays in every discipline with no prospect of impact and certainly the vast majority will never become professional scholars or researchers. Every speech student, however, has the potential to influence others, both in the classroom and elsewhere, both today and in the future. And with this in mind, let us consider the reasons I have suggested for our affinity with Aristotle more closely.

Textbooks, in some sense, are the speech teacher's natural enemy. On one hand, texts ipso-facto imply the primacy of literacy over orality and of the written over the spoken word. On the other, who can deny that our "Publishing-Educational Complex" is heavily invested in maintaining that primacy? Is there doubt that any potential textbook preparing for an end to the dominance of print is a likely candidate for editorial rejection? Yet contemporary media research, driven by ongoing advances in electronic media technology, enables us to counter the implications of writing's primacy, and to present the written or printed word as one more variation in the evolution of the media-language-cognition complex of human intellection (Haynes, 1988). Indeed, we should notice that the advance of video into the frontiers of the publishing industry is slow but steady and that the textbook's tenacious hold on tradition is slipping away.

Just like our textbooks, our teaching methods are

steeped in the writing-saturated classical paradigm. Note, for instance, how often we encourage and even require notecards and outlines in speech preparation. Of course, written preparation ensures that students have something to say, and further, it allows us to oversee the preparation process; but it also forces delivery to become performance and deters the possibility of genuine speaker-audience interaction (see Haynes, 1988, pp. 87-77). And note how likely we are to insist that speeches be organized into proofs and arguments, implicitly assuming that rational argument is rhetorically superior to other forms of persuasion. Could it be we take for granted the notion that rhetoric's humanism is grounded in its linking of traditional rationality to the discernment of correct values? This assumption may be sentimentally overwhelming yet is less than certain to retain primacy in the implicitly intersubjective realities of electronic media-dominated societies. Likewise, how can we root ourselves in free choice when the electronic media overwhelm us with too many choices? To endure, humanism itself must be grounded beyond media. At the present time, we delight in broadening our students' sensitivity to other points of view, but are still inclined to teach with a mystical reverence for traditional rhetoric that implies it is the magic pathway to discovery of the Platonic Forms.

Also there is the question of our own competence and that of our novice teachers in the basic course. Can it be that a possible reason we adhere to the classical tradition in the speech classroom is because we tend to be so competent in its application? I daresay that most speech professors, and most of our teaching associates in the basic course are former debaters. We are likely to be uncommonly skilled in the analysis and dispute of arguments. In fact, are we not sufficiently skilled to easily maintain comfortable intellectual dominance in the classroom? The traditional paradigm is the safest to teach, it is the least likely to cause problems, it is what our own teachers used. In a world where administrative priorities demand we protect our institutions by documenting classroom structure before we even begin to teach, Aristotelianism provides a happy answer. To whatever extent such may be the case, the situation cannot be easily remedied.

So, in summary, let us note that it is easy enough to speak of obligations, more difficult to prioritize and meet them. But as speech-communication scholars and teachers responsible for the success of the introductory college course in our discipline, ought we not try? We have obligations to our students, both the undergraduates who come to us for improved skills and increased understanding of communication in their lives, and the

graduates who look to us for their professional guidance. And, of course, we have obligations to humanity, at least in a general way, to promote the ascertainment of individual and common welfare, in knowledge and in practice. But do we not also have obligations to our colleagues and our discipline, to promote both our traditions and our progress? It seems that we do; that indeed, the obligation to progress is at least as strong as the obligation to tradition, that both are professionally imperative, and that the obligation to progress may all too often be ignored for the wrong reasons.

Yet for those who are willing to accept at least a rough parity between the comfort of tradition and the hope of innovation, let us consider re-envisioning the basic course classroom as a laboratory for new theory and examine the implications.

The Basic Course Classroom as Laboratory

First, let us dispense with the naive case, that any labelling--let alone actual use--of the classroom as a laboratory will incur the wrath of the Committee for Research on Human Subjects. The students are not subjects here any more than in any classroom: students must be regarded as researchers into their own communicative behavior and that of their fellows, and of their teachers.

Surely we all agree that basic course students should be helped to develop their own faculties, their own communication equipment, to fine-tune their abilities to send, to receive, and to confirm--in sum to traffic--in effective messages. Students are not in this sense subjects at all; they are experimenters.

As a variation on this issue, one may be prone to ask if teaching students new theory--to whatever extent the new supplants the old--may short-change them; that students are entitled to learn effective communication which new theory may not teach. But is this any different from asking if the teaching of new theory in chemistry or philosophy may short-change the student? The answer, in every case, depends not on the theory alone but on the whole skein of factors that conspire to produce an effective classroom experience. Short-changing may occur, on the one hand, in some teachers' classrooms, and on the other, may occur wholesale whenever a new theory falls short of expectations, but it is certainly not a factor made unique by the nature of speech-communication. Rather it is an inherent and necessary part of the university experience.

Is the basic course the place for it? Should not new theory be integrated first into advanced courses where more experienced students will apply it with discrimination? Perhaps in some cases, but when our

concern is with praxis, with using theory in the design of speeches, the basic course is likely best-suited to that endeavor. Also, since our basic course is so often taught by fledgling teachers, what better way to firmly instill the practice of integrating new theory as an important part of pedagogy? Indeed, how else, really, can it happen?

Our basic course programs may be seen as several-tiered laboratories. At the top are course directors who, among their responsibilities, ought to encourage well-planned and theoretically sound innovations in the classroom. Like all research executives, course directors keep abreast of our journals and should be expected to encourage the sorts of innovation among graduate teaching assistants that bring new theory into the classroom. Of course, whenever one tries out a pedagogical innovation, there is bound to be a sense in which one's students are the guinea pigs, but it is a sense implicit in the nature of good teaching, not at all the sort that brings out the human subjects committee. And there need be no suggestion that the development of innovation might ever be assigned a higher priority than is given to student outcomes. In any event, it seems that director and individual teacher alike need to take a measure of personal responsibility for course outcomes that permits without question a certain amount of experimentation in every class. After all, if there is not

room for innovation, then teaching--as well as theory--will never improve.

Indeed, what better approach to examining the complex juxtaposition of student rights, teacher goals, relevance, and institutional priorities than by leading novice teachers to develop pedagogical applications of new theory? The basic course director is a researcher too, doing research in speech, research in methods of teaching speech, and, finally, in methods of teaching the pedagogy of speech. The director presides over a series of classroom laboratories where the theoretical material novice teachers learn in their other classes is put to test.

And for the teaching assistants themselves, the obligation to theoretical progress is surely an important part of their graduate school experience. The truism that "to fully understand a theory, one must grasp the problem it seeks to solve" (Schroeder, 1986, p. 11), is a warrant for enrichment of graduate pedagogical development. In fact, giving our novice teachers a mandate to increase the effectiveness of undergraduate students' communicative behavior can be the most powerful single force in our graduate programs. And if graduate students are encouraged to go beyond the safety of tradition to a realm where effective praxis holds sway, we thereby assure that they will measure their developing academic identities against

realistic criteria.

And, of course, beginning speech students must also be made partners in the enterprise. Instead of being allowed to believe that they will be taught the correct way to make a speech--all too often the outcome of traditional approaches--students should be given to understand that the basic course is actually a sort of laboratory where they will experiment with a variety of approaches to getting the most out of their own individual equipment. Every student speech becomes an experiment and an opportunity for all students to test and apply their own growing theoretical and experiential repertoires.

Obviously, the testing and application students will do involves critical as well as creative activity. With this in mind, it is possible to uncover still another reason why new theory has such a difficult time in the basic course: despite our willingness to apply new theory in papers and essays, classroom critical methods tend to be as steeped in the classical paradigm as is our curriculum of speech preparation. Rating forms that enumerate desirable qualities as though they were quantifiable absolutes are practically universal. Shouldn't this make us blush? How can we possibly hope to meaningfully evaluate experiences we are too busy rating to actually have? Real audiences, after all, do not use

rating forms or apply quantitative schemata. Real audiences respond. Yet it is far simpler to assign numerical values to time-honored categories than it is to critically justify them. In fact, this is a process we all too often take for granted. But teachers in the basic course, of all places, should be eclectic and experiential, should be willing, able, and encouraged to apply a wide variety of critical metaphors, and not simply to impose the classical overlay time after time.

This essay has argued for a special relationship between practices in our basic course and the advancement of theoretical knowledge in our field. Further, several barriers to the fulfillment of that relationship have been identified and their fundamentally media-determinant character suggested. Finally, a rationale has been presented for encouraging innovative attempts to bring new theory into the basic course by regarding the classroom as a laboratory, its denizens as researchers, and every student speech or exercise as an experiment.

In conclusion, we may do well to observe that, to whatever extent our tendency to stick with Aristotelianism is bound to the domination of written media, to that extent, the tendency is rapidly becoming an anachronism. By deliberately broadening the basic course focus to include new theory, we take an important step to ease our path as we reach for the future.

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